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ABSTRACT

This handbook, published by the Teen Father's Program of the Sacramento (California) YWCA, outlines options available to teen fathers-to-be, as well as adolescent males who are already fathers, and where they can find help. While the final decision about pregnancy legally rests with the mother, the father can be involved in the process by helping the mother make the decision, supporting the mother, and being an involved father if the mother decides to keep the baby. Fathers-to-be are especially encouraged to be responsible and patient and to help support the mother, even though she may be feeling very sensitive and depressed. The following options are briefly explained: (1) adoption, whether handled independently (open adoption) or through an agency (closed adoption), requires that the father and the mother give up all rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parents; (2) abortion is a highly emotional issue but is a legal option that is safer for adolescent mothers than giving birth; (3) foster care is generally a short-term option in which the baby lives in a foster home but the father and mother are still legally the parents; and (4) keeping the baby, an option chosen by many teens, requires an honest assessment of maturity, the impact of the baby on daily life, and financial resources. The answers to 16 questions commonly asked by teen fathers are included. A list of two references, a brief description of the Teen Father's Program, and a list of 31 community resources are appended. (FMW)

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TEEN FATHER HANDBOOK

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...een fathers and teen fathers-to-be

...raight talk for young fathers

by K. Maybury

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INTRODUCTION

When you hear the news that you are going to be a teen father, many emotions can go rushing through you. You may feel alone, confused, guilty, angry, excited, proud, panicky.... or all of these emotions at once.

It is important to know that you are not alone. There are hundreds of guys like you in Sacramento alone. You do not have to travel this difficult road by yourself. There are people you can call on, for free. One of these groups is the YWCA Teen Father's Program. At the TFP, we don't help you; we work with you to form a plan for your future.

If you are a teen father-to-be, it is important to make some kind of plan so you can deal with the pregnancy in a way that's best for you, the baby and the baby's mother. You and your girlfriend* need to consider the options you have for the pregnancy. Your four basic options are: adoption, abortion, foster care and keeping the baby. With all of these choices, it is true that the sooner you and the mother make up your mind about the pregnancy, the better.

If you have already had a child, this handbook is also for you. You may want to skip ahead to page 6, where concerns of teen fatherhood are addressed to your particular needs.

If you want to speak further to someone about the above pregnancy options after reading this handbook, you are welcome to call the Teen Father's Program. The number is 442-4741. Call anytime, Monday through Friday, 9AM - 5PM.

* We use the word girlfriend, but the mother of your baby may be your ex-girlfriend, wife, friend or just an acquaintance.

A TFP counselor can tell you in detail about these options, and can refer you to the people to call if you want to check a particular option out. You should know, however, that the final decision is up to the baby's mother. This is the law. You can be involved by helping your girlfriend make the decision about the pregnancy, supporting your girlfriend (this is a time she needs a good friend the most), and being an involved father if she is to keep the baby.

Some guys feel frustrated by their "lack of rights" in the baby's future. You do have some rights, such as, if the girl decides to give the baby up for adoption without your consent, you may be able to keep your baby yourself. For more information on your rights, ask a TFP counselor. You may feel left out during this time of decision-making, that there's no place for you in this time of your girlfriend and baby's life. If you are concerned, you can be a responsible partner and help support your girlfriend. Stick by her...even though she may be very sensitive and feeling low. You may have to have more patience at this time.

The TFP counselor can be there to bounce ideas back and forth with you as you formulate your plan. Or he/she can be there to talk with you and give suggestions for other concerns you might have, like: How do I tell my parents I'm going to be a father? Can I get a job even though I'm only 15? Is my girlfriend going to be okay through this? What is open vs. closed adoption? What are my rights as a father?

PREGNANCY OPTIONS

Following are brief explanations of the four options available to you and your girlfriend.

ADOPTION:

If you choose adoption, you and your girlfriend give up all rights and responsibilities of your child to the adoptive parents. There are two types of adoption, independent ("open") and agency ("closed").

Independent adoption is an option in which the birth parents (you and your girlfriend) are able to choose from an assortment of parents who want a baby. You can even meet face to face with a couple before you make your final decision. In many cases, the parents who adopt your child send letters and photos to you periodically to let you know how the child is doing.

Agency adoption is an option in which an adoption agency places the child with a family. Social workers visit the home before and after the baby is adopted by a couple to make sure it is a good home. In both types of adoption, the costs of having the baby can be paid by the agency, the couple adopting the baby, or Medi-Cal. To learn more about these two options, call the TFP.

ABORTION:

People have a lot of strong feelings about abortion. It is an emotional issue. The earlier an abortion is done, the safer, easier and cheaper it is. Remember, no one can force the girl to have an abortion and no one can force her to have the baby either. Some important things to know— abortion is

legal. Medically speaking, it is safer for teen girls to have an abortion than to give birth. A girl can still get pregnant after an abortion, so birth control must be used after the procedure. For more information on exactly what this pregnancy option entails, call the TFP or Planned Parenthood. (This, along with other reference numbers, are on the back page).

FOSTER CARE:

With this alternative, the baby lives in a foster home, yet you and your girlfriend are still legally the parents of the child. Foster care is generally a short-term arrangement. It is not good for a child to be apart from you for a long time. If you and your girlfriend feel you'll be able to care for the child after a short time, foster care may be a solution. There are several different types of foster care available. (Including private foster care, in which someone you personally know temporarily takes care of the baby). To learn more about this possibility, call the Department of Child Welfare or the TFP.

KEEPING THE BABY:

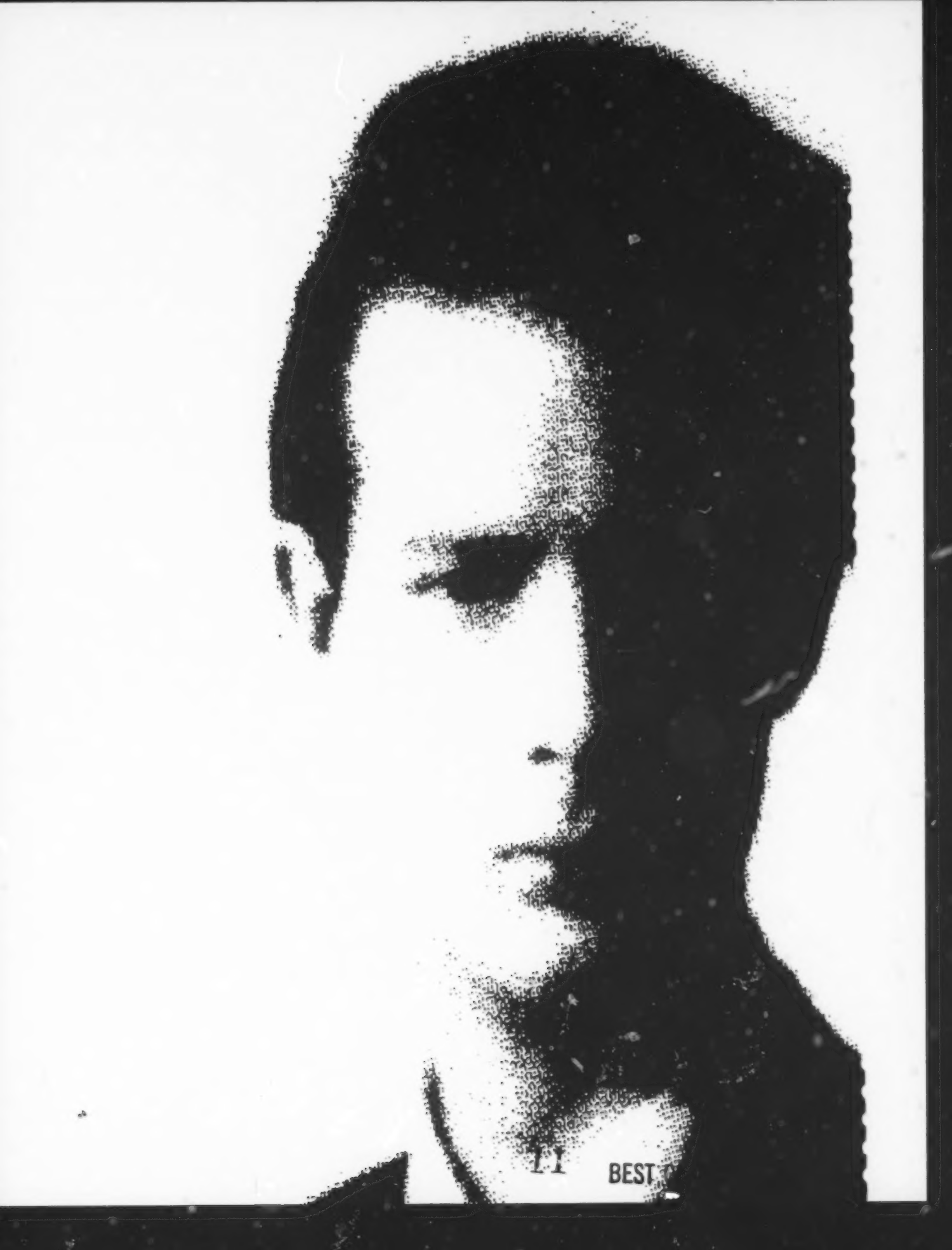
This is an option that many teen parents choose. Here are some important things to ask yourself when considering keeping the baby: What have I done in the past that compares to taking care of a baby? How will the daily care of a child affect my life? Am I mature and responsible enough to handle a baby when it is crying and cranky as well as warm and cuddly? How will I support my child? Talking with other teen parents may help you and your girlfriend decide if this choice is for you. You can meet some teen parents through the YWCA Teen Father's Program

and Teen Age Parent Program.

Teens who have taken the road of keeping their baby often come colliding with the reality of a screaming baby at two in the morning, every morning. Teens most successful with the decision to keep their babies have a place to stay, money, and the support of family and friends.

Do you have these assets? We want you to know exactly what you are choosing if you and your girlfriend decide to keep the baby.

We'll be honest. Many teen couples' relationships crumble under the strain of having a baby. Is your relationship problem-free, committed and strong with communication skills? Do you have a great deal of respect and trust going on between you both? Can you both withstand the demands of a helpless child entirely dependant upon you both, 24 hours per day, 365 days per year?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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Following are some common questions teen fathers ask. If you have additional questions call 442-4741 and ask for the Teen Father's Program.

Q. "I'm not sure we're even going to keep the baby. We're still thinking of adoption or abortion. Is there anyone who can help straighten this out with us?"

A. Yes. Sometimes a guy in this situation feels no one cares what he thinks. The TFP assists you by listening to you in a judgement-free atmosphere and letting you know exactly what your options are for your situation. You can also meet other teen parents (if you want) which might help you make your decision.

Q. "My girlfriend won't even talk to me. I want to be a father to the baby but she's shut me out. What can I do?"

A. Some guys experience their girlfriend's anger by being shut out. Maybe you can communicate to your girlfriend your willingness to help and stay by her side during this difficult time. You and she don't have to be husband and wife (or even boyfriend and girlfriend) to be good parents to a child. It helps to be on friendly terms with each other, though. A YWCA TFP counselor can tell you about how some other teen moms and dads work this problem out. (There are also programs to help your girlfriend that we can tell you about).

Q. "I need a job. Babies are really expensive. Where do I go to get a good paying job?"

A. The surest way to get a good paying job is to get as much education and job training as you can. The finest all-around plan that we've seen teen dads come up with is (a) finishing high school (at least) while (b) acquiring a part-time job. School is the ticket to a better future. The more education you get, the better job you will get. It's that simple. If you have dropped out, we can give you information on obtaining your G.E.D. (Graduate Equivalency Diploma), going back to school, or job training opportunities. If you're in school now, we can help you stay in school and get your degree as well as help find a part-time job so you can help out with the baby's expenses.

Q."My Dad was never around when I was growing up. How can I make sure I'm going to be a good Dad?"

A. That's great that you are committed to being a true father to your baby! There are tons of good books on parenting at your local bookstore or library. You can also learn about parenting at special classes held around Sacramento. Some are particularly geared toward teen parents. For more information on good parenting call the Teen Fathers Program: 442-4741.

Q. "Why is your agency working with teen age fathers and teen age fathers-to-be?"

A. The Sacramento YWCA has worked with teen age mothers for more than 6 years. We have just recently become aware of how many guys there are in your

situation in the local area. To help the growing number of young fathers around town, this program was formed. The services are available to you for the asking.

Q. "I feel like everyone is treating me like a walking wallet. Their pressure is really driving me nuts."

A. This is a common complaint among teen fathers and teen fathers-to-be. You might consider offering your help in other ways besides money to help get others into the mode of treating you more as a person than simply a "wallet". For instance, you can be a source of strength for the mother of the baby by offering to baby-sit or bringing the mother and baby to the doctor. Let others know that you are mature by helping out with those things money can't buy—such as love and concern for the baby and mother. If you only have a little money but want to help out with the baby's needs, you might offer to pay one or two expenses— like maybe diapers or shoes for your child.

Q. "Say I do call the Teen Fathers Program; I'm not going to get lectured am I? I have enough of that from my parents and relatives."

A. We aren't here to lecture you. We are here to be a support system that you can call on with any questions or concerns or problems. No one at TFP has any motive other than helping you in the areas you feel you need assistance. We want to help you face this challenge in a way that makes you feel good and proud of yourself.

Q. "I have some questions about birth control but I'm too embarrassed to ask someone I know. Do you have that type of information available?"

A. You can call and ask a question over the phone or we can send you information on birth control. There is no need to be embarrassed. We have heard all the questions before. You can also call Planned Parenthood about birth control questions and concerns. They are really nice and friendly. See the back page for these numbers.

Q. "My girlfriend had an abortion and I feel really bad about it. Can someone there lend me an ear?"

A. Some guys feel really relieved after the abortion; others feel pangs of guilt and sadness about the loss; some guys really get depressed over the abortion—especially if they were opposed to it. There is counseling available for you (and your girlfriend) should you find you want or need someone to talk to. Discussing your experience with a counselor can really help.

Q. "My girlfriend and I got along great until the baby came. Now we fight all the time. I wish it would all just go away so we could have fun again."

A. You might consider coming in to see our TFP counselor who can help you sort out your conflicts. It may help to know that most couples fight more after a big life change like having a baby. We can help you two manage your anger and meet other teen parents and learn how they deal with the stresses in their lives.

Q. "I feel really stupid when it comes to my baby girl. She's so small I think I'd break her if I held her. How do you change a diaper anyway?"

A. You might ask someone you know who has children to give you a "crash course" in baby care. We can give you pointers on how to feed, clothe and change your baby. We can teach you about basic parenting skills— and offer you support all new parents need.

Q. "I feel like this pregnancy has messed up my whole life. What about my plans for college and career?"

A. With careful planning both you and the mother of the baby can build a future with a good career despite having a baby at an early age. It will be a lot tougher than it is for the average young person, but with determination and hard work, you can still have your dreams realized. A plan is important though. For more information on how other guys have continued schooling and landed a good job despite having a baby, call the TFP for some suggestions.

Q. "I really want my girlfriend to have an abortion or give the baby up for adoption but she won't listen to reason. Now she's messing up my life because of keeping a baby I don't even want."

A. No one can force a girl to have an abortion or give up her baby. You can't keep her from doing these two things either. While it may seem unfair to you, try to see it from her perspective. After all, she's the one who has to carry the baby for nine months. If your

girlfriend decides on the adoption route, you may have some rights. A counselor from the Teen Father's Program can give you some guidance in terms of those rights.

Q. "I decided to keep our baby because my girlfriend didn't want him. Sometimes I regret it. He cries a lot, my family isn't much help to me and sometimes I just want out."

A. You have some options open to you, including temporary and permanent foster care. Or maybe you just need to let off some steam and talk about parenting skills that can help you in your situation. We can tell you more about your options if you call us with the particulars of your situation.

Q. "Sometimes I am so mad at myself and my girlfriend and the baby that I feel like climbing the walls. I don't understand how something this serious could have happened because of one careless moment."

A. It is understandable that you feel overwhelmed at times. Remember that feeling angry is normal and ok...but turning it into violence is not. It's important in life to learn to express yourself calmly to a person who makes you angry and to explain why you are angry. Ask the person his/her suggestions on a compromise that will make you both happier. If either of you are too mad to take this step, take a "time out" (like a walk around the block) until you are calmer. Then a solution is more likely. Free conflict counseling and handouts on anger management are available through the TFP.

Q. "My old girlfriend had my baby a few months ago and now my new girlfriend doesn't want me to see my baby or my old girlfriend. How do other guys manage to see their kid and still keep their social life alive?"

A. You might consider how much this new girlfriend really cares for you. She should respect those things and people that are important to you. You, too, have to respect that your new girlfriend may be feeling insecure at all of the responsibilities you have at such a young age and the ties you have to this old girlfriend. Be careful about not flaunting your old and new girlfriends to each other. It is perhaps most important that you find a way to spend time with your child. You may try offering your services as a babysitter to your old girlfriend so that she can get out and start socializing again too.

Q. " I'm worried that my girlfriend is hurting the baby. She's seems like she's pretending she's not pregnant; still smoking and drinking and eating junk food. What can I do to get through to her that she's carrying my baby and she needs to be healthier?"

A. You are justified in being worried. The sooner the mother makes a decision about the baby, the better off she'll be. She needs to see a doctor as soon as she finds out she's pregnant. You should encourage her to stop smoking and drinking. These habits are unbelievably bad for the baby. There are programs designed to get help and someone to talk to who is impartial. At the YWCA TFP, a counselor can refer you to some excellent drug/alcohol abuse programs.

Q. "The way I see it, dealing with babies is for girls. I don't want to be a wimp and change diapers all day."

A. Look, any guy can get a girl pregnant. It takes a real man to stick around and be a father. Most fathers these days are a lot more involved in rearing their kids than they were even 10-20 years ago. Get with the nineties. You are now a father. Are you going to sit back and hope it all works out? Or are you going to nurture your child? If you aren't part of the solution, you're part of the problem.

Q. "I dropped out of school when I was 16. Now I have no job, no money and my girl is pregnant! What do I do?"

A. You need three things: a plan, strength of character, and motivation to get yourself on a path toward success. Your best bet is finding a part-time job while starting on your G.E.D. coursework. This will allow you to move up into better paying jobs soon after the baby is born, which is when you'll probably need the money the most.

Free job training is also available, if you qualify as low-income. For more specific direction, call the counselor at TFP. The people at TFP can evaluate your specific case and let you know what your options are.

Q. "I do not want to tell my parents about this but my girlfriend and I have to let them in on it soon. How do I drop a bombshell like this on them? They'll be so bummed at me."

A. Your parents probably will be bummed at first. They may get angry, cry or just be shocked. Try to rehearse what you're going to say with someone you know well. It will make it easier when you finally meet with your folks. Most parents help once they get over the initial shock. If they want to help, try to let them help you. It will make them feel better. For more guidance on telling your parents of your pregnancy, call the TFP.

Q. "Is there a program like this for my girlfriend?"

A. Yes. There are a few around Sacramento and surrounding towns. One is the YWCA Teen Age Parent Program. She can meet other girls who are pregnant or parenting at these programs. Many have weekly rap group meetings to discuss various topics concerning teens and pregnancy.

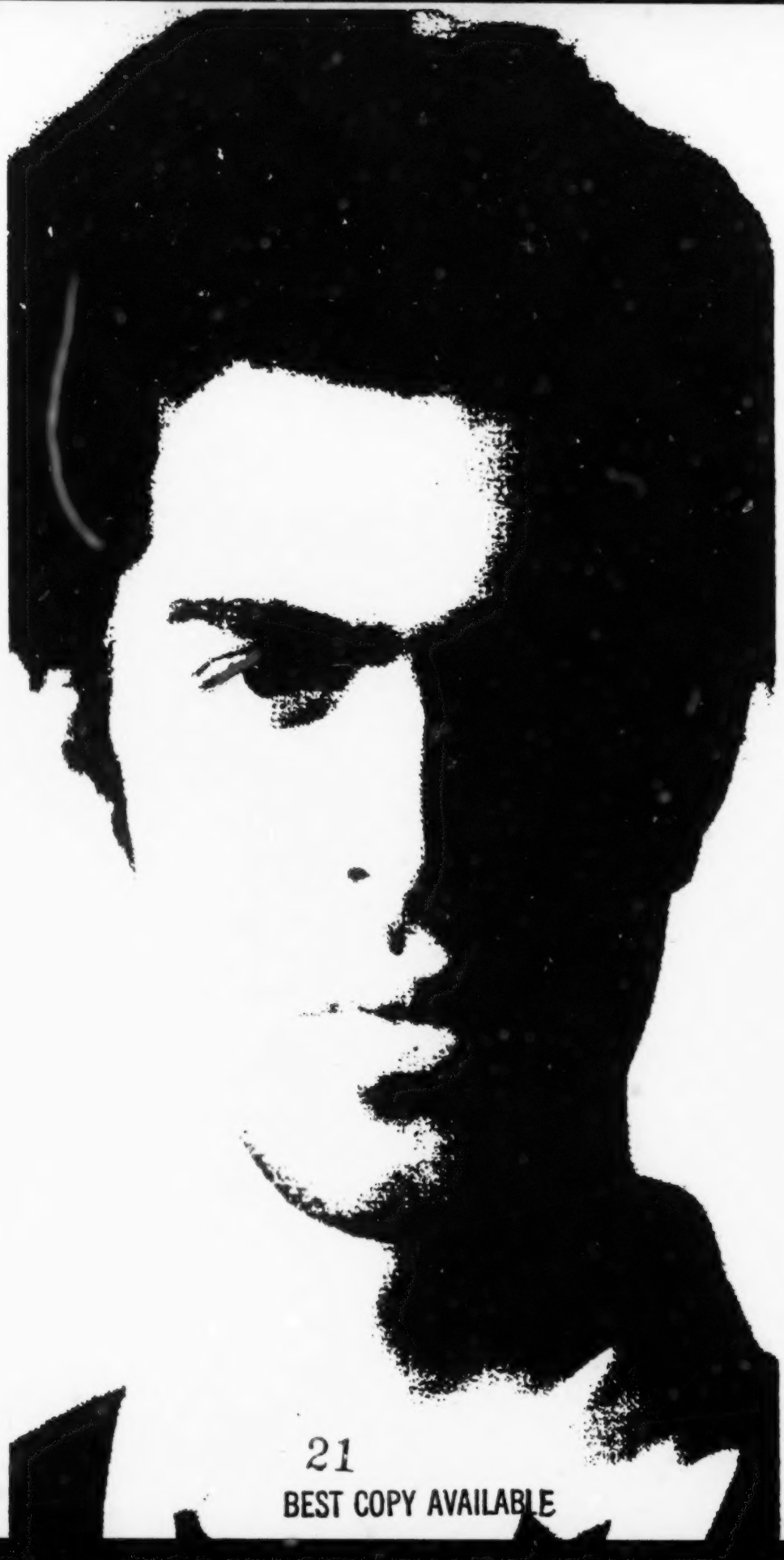
Q. "What happens when I call the TFP? What do I do?"

A. Call 442-4741. Ask to speak to a teen father counselor. If you have some questions or just want to check out the services available, you can set up a time to meet with the counselor. The counselor can meet with you at the YWCA or at the Meadowview Community Action Office. Or you can just talk over the phone. All of this is free and confidential. You don't have to pay anything; no matter what your family's income.

REFERENCES:

Bell, Ruth et al. (1987). Changing Bodies, changing lives. NY: Vintage.

Corey, G. (1986). I never knew I had a choice. Monterey, CA: Brooks.



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THE TEEN FATHER'S PROGRAM IS...

- Free.
- Confidential.
- For any teen father, father-to-be, or teen concerned about the possibility of pregnancy.
- A place to learn about other services available to teen parents.
- A good starting point in the struggle to be an involved father.
- Where teen fathers go to meet each other.
- A place to learn how other teen fathers cope.

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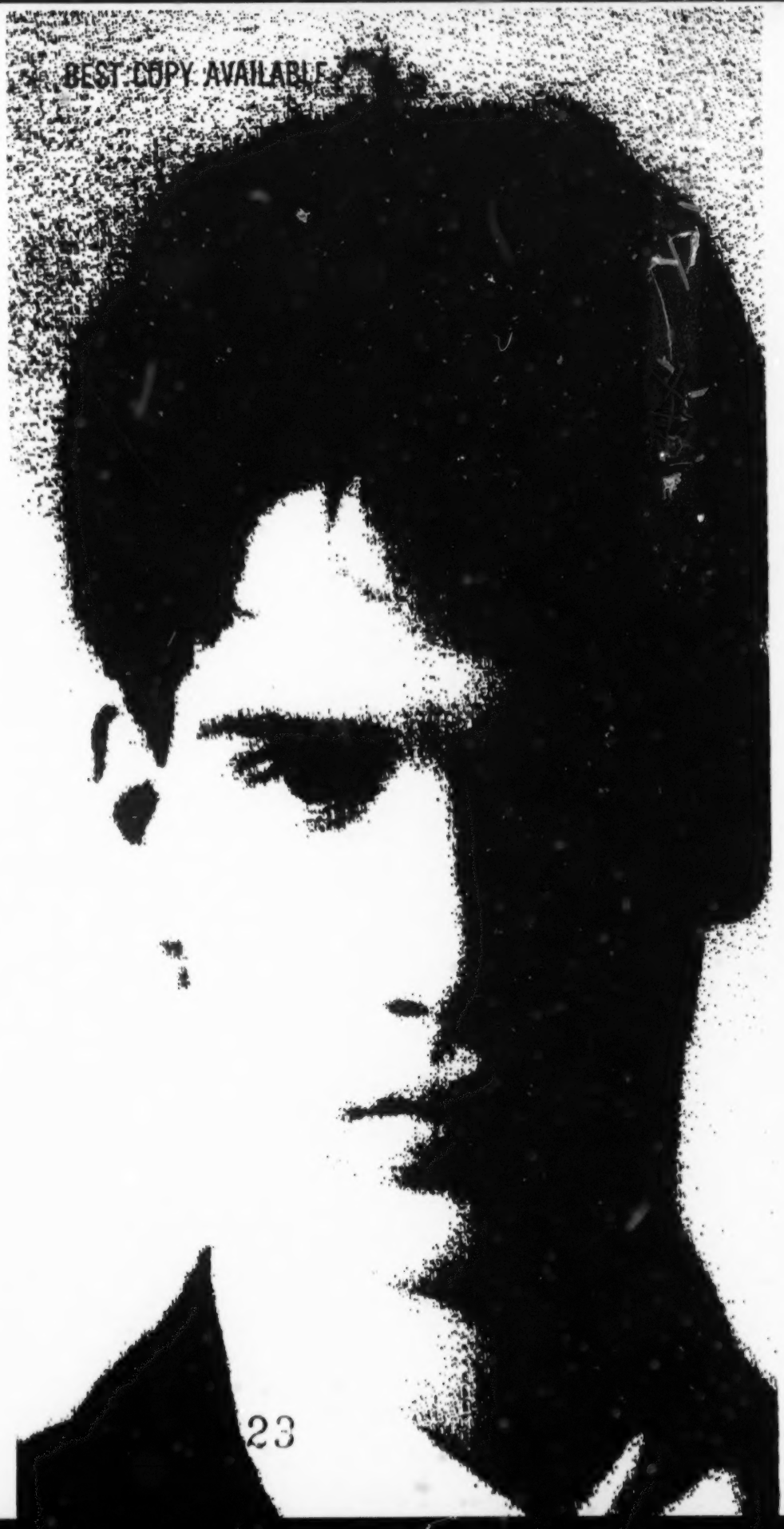

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Below are several phone numbers that you might find useful. If you don't see what you need here or in the phone book, you are welcome to call the YWCA TFP for more direction.

Adolescent Family Life Program 486-8096

AIDS Hotline 1-800-367-2437
Information and referral.

Alternatives Program 440-6356
Counseling for drug abuse problems,
Individual, group and family counseling.

American River Hospital Teen Clinic 486-8336

The Birthing Project 442-BABY
Provides a "big sister" for pregnant young women.

California Runaway Hotline (24-hour)
.....1-800-843-5200

Catholic Social Services 452-7481

Central Downtown Food Closet 441-4002

Chemical Dependency Center 448-2951

Community Childcare Programs Inc.....344-6243

Community Information Center 442-4995

A service that links people to over 1,000 agencies in Sacramento. Also gives info.regarding housing.

Department of Social Services

Public Inquiries ..... 322-2400 (AFDC)

Adoptions 322-5973

County, General Info 978-2101

Diogenes Youth Services (24-hour) 363-0063

Individual, group and family counseling; crisis resolution.

The Effort - Drug Counseling 444-6294

Food Stamps 732-3156

Job Corps Center (Sacramento) 393-2880

Vocational training in 26 areas. 17-21 year-olds. Free.

La Familia Counseling Center 452-3601

Legal Services of Northern California 444-6760

Free legal services to low-income, eligible clients in civil law matters.

Medi-Cal Information (on AFDC) 732-3560

Non-assistance Medi-Cal (non-AFDC) 732-3661

Planned Parenthood of Sacramento Valley

Fruitridge 452-7305

North Highlands 332-5715

Rancho Cordova 635-2168

Surgical Services 446-6921

Police Athletic League 452-4069

Protective Services for Children (24-hour)
..... 366-2386

Sacramento Employment & Training Agency
..... 449-1300
(SETA) Free job training programs.

Sacramento Urban League 739-0627

Sierra Adoption Services 368-3065

Suicide Prevention Service of Sacramento
..... 368-3111

Tel Law 448-6931
Over-the-phone answers to legal questions.

Tele-Tips For Teens 362-5588
24-hour telephone information system.

Venereal Diseases Hotline 1-800-227-8922
Info. on sexually transmitted diseases.

YWCA SOLO TRANSITION Program 442-4741
Employment and training information.

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YWCA

The Sacramento YWCA is a United Way
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